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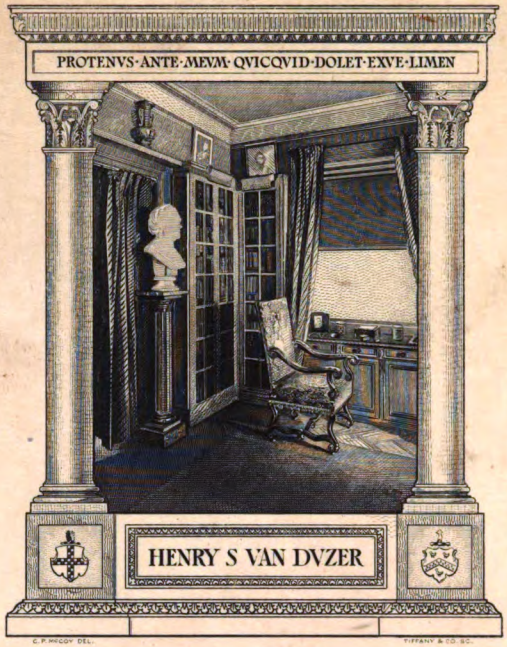

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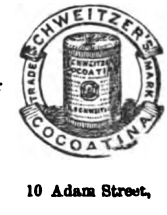

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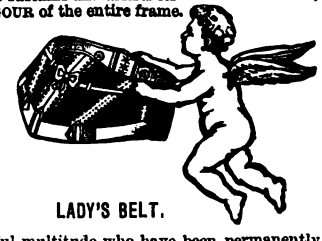

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WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY.

By JOSEPH FORSTER.

IN an attempt to analyze a character and genius like Thackeray's one is confronted with great difficulties and apparent contradictions. The ordinary conception of Thackeray as a cynic who delighted in exposing and ridiculing the imperfections and absurdities of human nature is not only superficial, it is erroneous and absurd.

It takes longer than some people think to see all round so all round a genius as Thackeray's. So many of us just see one point or part of a man of genius and conveniently ignore the rest; and the point we see so imperfectly is often a very trivial one. As Carlyle, with profound wisdom and insight, once said: "People should try to see before they pretend to oversee." That explains a great many of the absurd and contradictory opinions that persons who are not geniuses form on those who are. It is very difficult to understand a genius, and very easy to misunderstand and abuse him. Perhaps that is why so many people do so.

Thackeray made many efforts to be an artist before he found out that he was meant for an author. We all know the story of his sending some of his drawings to Charles Dickens, and offering to illustrate his works, which were then appearing in shilling monthly parts. But it was a long weary time before Thackeray's delicious works sold. The dedication of the "Paris Sketch Book"—a dead failure when it first appeared—to a Parisian tailor, with whom Thackeray lodged during his student days, is very touching, and does infinite honour to both. Thackeray, like most young authors, was very poor, and apologized for not paying his rent. His tailor landlord not only accepted the apology instead of the rent, but offered to lend Thackeray money.

Doubtless most of my readers have read the story in the preface to the "Paris Sketch Book," but it is such a beautiful tribute to the goodness of human nature that I could not resist the temptation to repeat it.

While we are considering this bright and beautiful side of the man so many foolish people call a cynic, let me tell a story that I am sure you have never heard before. I was once talking to the son of an artist who, some time after his father's death, met Thackeray on the knifeboard of an omnibus. Thackeray knew of the father's death, and that the widow had been left with several

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children, poorly provided for. He inquired of the boy as to his mother's health, and gave him a heavy pill-box, telling him to give it to his mother with his kind regards. She was also to let him know if more medicine of the same kind was required. The pill-box was filled with sovereigns! Doubtless hundreds of cases could be cited of noble acts of generosity performed by this noble man with surpassing tenderness and delicacy.

But let us look at the worst side of the case. Take his almost ferocious "Book of Snobs." I should like every boy of fourteen in the kingdom to possess a copy; it would do them more good than all the twaddling goody-goody books ever written. Whom and what does Thackeray attack and deride in that unique book? The affected snobs, the proud prig, the hypocritical humbug. He never ridicules weakness, poverty, or innocence. His eyes filled and his pockets emptied at the sight of all human suffering and distress.

Thackeray loved children with all his great heart. He loved their laugh; he loved their play, and for a very simple reason: like a real man of genius he was a child at heart to the last day of his life. He loved to tip boys at school; he loved to the last to take children to the pantomime, and could always laugh at their laughter if not at the clown.

But although Thackeray was admired by such men as Carlyle and John Sterling, who thought the "Great Hoggarty Diamond" one of the best stories ever penned, he did not please "that great big stupid," the public, until he published one of the greatest, wisest, truest pictures of modern life extant, I mean "Vanity Fair." This took the reading world by storm, like "Pickwick," "Jane Eyre" and "Adam Bede," and no wonder. There is nothing finer in fiction than this wonderful work. The profound knowledge of human nature, the subtle analysis of character, the life, the humour, the tenderness, fun and irony are prodigious. And the manly love of justice and truth, and hatred of cant, affectation, cruelty and meanness are as remarkable as in Dickens himself. Becky Sharpe comes to grief; the snob Osborne is made ridiculous; poor Amelia is better treated, perhaps, than she deserves; but the manly, ugly, noble grocer's son, Dobbin, who looks up to the handsome snob Osborne, is one of the most beautiful creations in fiction. We laugh at him at first, but when we learn what a noble, honest, manly heart the ugly fellow with the big hands and feet has we love and bow down to him with respect and reverence.

Then the immortal Becky Sharpe. Her first struggles with sordid poverty, her cunning, her coquetry, and her utter want of principle, and that delightful scene in which she hooks and nearly succeeds in landing the fat Joe Sedley, are described with a rich humour, truth, and knowledge of human nature that have never been, and, I think, never can be, surpassed.

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But if one wished to show the tender, beautiful, noble nature of Thackeray one would cite the finest gentleman in literature—Colonel Newcome. This character is Thackeray's finest. The unaffected simplicity, generosity, manliness and sweetness of this character are beyond the reach of praise. The scene at Evans', where some blackguards sing improper songs before the boy Clive, and thus arouse the wrath of the old colonel, is done as only Thackeray could do it. The death of the old man in the Gray Friars hospital is almost heart-breaking in its pathos.

What strikes me in Thackeray is his extraordinary charity and fervent admiration for everything good and great in character and literature. You all know that he said he loved Fielding so much that he would have blacked his boots for him. His admiration for Dickens was intense: he expressed it over and over again in his works. He would often call on Dickens and say: "Dickens, I have come to dine with you, and talk over your splendid new number."

The beautiful articles he wrote in the *Cornhill* on the death of Macaulay, of whom he said "he read a hundred books to write one sentence," Charlotte Brontë, and Nathaniel Hawthorne are full of enthusiastic praise, the tenderest feeling, and subtlest discrimination. He seemed to be utterly destitute of envy, which has been supposed to be a literary failing. I am afraid that failing is not confined to literary men and women.

The moral influence of Thackeray's works, in my humble opinion, has been enormous. I don't think the veriest snob in this country of snobs could read Thackeray without benefit. His books are pre-eminently wholesome and pure. He does not, by subtle sophistry, try to make the worse appear the better cause. With unerring moral instinct he separates the true from the false. He represents humanity as it is; he strips the mask from the hypocrite, and covers the humbug with contempt and ridicule. But when he describes Lady Castlewood, Ethel Newcome, and the poor victim of that smiling, bowing, flattering, unctuous scoundrel, Dr. Firmin, what infinite tenderness, delicacy and pity he displays.

Thackeray loved and hated with a force that would have delighted Dr. Johnson himself. His intense, almost passionate, earnestness reminds me of Carlyle. Thackeray's character, his intense personality, animates everything he touched. And the pains he took were enormous. He thoroughly believed, and acted on the belief, that easy writing is hard reading. He polished his prose more than some poets do their verse: he returned to it again and again. When the writer will not blot at all, the world is very likely to revenge itself by blotting all. A lover of Thackeray, which means a man of some culture, is never tired of his works. He reads them again and again with new

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zest because the style is so delightfully clear and polished. He took up his manuscript time after time to touch and retouch till his fastidious taste was satisfied. After Thackeray's death his friends found some sheets of manuscript in his pocket-book scored and underscored twenty times over. The world is not so foolish as some sloppy writers appear to think, and appreciates care and finish. As a rule, the works that live deserve to live. The slap-dash style may last for a time, through the wonderful art of puffing, but it soon dies out. The "rubbish shot here" style is not, never was, and never can be successful. Many noble and beautiful works fail; but bad, vulgar work cannot survive. We all know Carlyle's definition of genius, as the infinite capacity of taking trouble; it is the finest I know.

Now, I will just quote a few pages of Thackeray. We are, I believe, all lovers of Thackeray, and, as good things are made better by being shared, we will add our admirations together, so to speak, till we reach a higher point of enjoyment and appreciation than we have reached before.

I believe with Goethe, who said, that before a man ventures to find faults in a work of genius he should prove his capacity to appreciate its beauties.

The following is a specimen of Thackeray's splendid vein of irony:

"ENSIGN SNOOKS' SPEECH AT WATERLOO."

"Suppose Ensign Snooks made a speech and said to the soldiers, 'Look at these Frenchmen, British soldiers,' says he, 'and remember who they are. Two-and-twenty years since they hurled their king from his throne and murdered him (groans). They flung out of their country their ancient and famous nobility; they published the audacious doctrine of equality; they made a cadet of artillery—a beggarly lawyer's son—into an emperor, and took ignoramuses from the ranks—drummers and privates, by Jove!—of whom they made kings, generals and marshals! Is this to be borne?' (Cries of No, No!) 'Upon them, my boys! down with these godless revolutionists, and rally round the British lion!' So saying, Ensign Snooks (whose flag—which he can't carry—is held by a huge, grizzly, colour-sergeant) draws a little sword and pipes out a feeble huzza. Then the men of his company, roaring curses at the Frenchmen, prepare to receive and repel a thundering charge of French cuirassiers. The men fight, and Ensign Snooks is knighted because the men fought so well."

To illustrate the fun, and honest, manly, satirical force of our author, let me introduce the following poem, and its parody:

"THE WILLOW TREE."

"Know ye the willow tree
  Whose grey leaves quiver,
Whispering gloomily
  To yon pale river?
Lady, at even-tide,
  Wander not near it:
They say its branches hide
  A sad, lost spirit!

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"Once to the willow tree
A maid came fearful,
Pale seemed her cheek to be,
Her blue eye tearful;
Soon as she saw the tree,
Her steps moved fleeter;
No one was there—ah, me!—
No one to meet her!

"Quick beat her heart to hear
The far bells chime
Toll from the chapel tower
The trysting time:
But the red sun went down
In golden flame,
And, though she looked around,
Yet no one came.

"Presently came the night,
Sadly to greet her,—
Moon in her silver light,
Stars in their glitter.
Then sank the moon away
Under the billow,
Still wept the maid alone—
There by the willow!

"Through the long darkness,
By the stream rolling,
Hour after hour went on
Tolling and tolling.
Long was the darkness
Lonely and stilly;
Shrill came the night wind,
Piercing and chilly.

"Shrill blew the morning breeze
Biting and cold,
Bleak peers the grey dawn
Over the wold.
Bleak over moor and stream
Looks the grey dawn,
Grey, with dishevelled hair,
Still stands the willow there—
The maid is gone!

"Domine! Domine!
Sing we a litany;
Sing for poor maiden hearts
Broken and weary;
Domine! Domine!
Sing we a litany,
Wail we and weep we
A wild Miserere!"

Now for Thackeray's parody:

"Long by the willow trees
Vainly they sought her,
Wild rang the mother's screams
O'er the grey water:
Where is my lovely one?
Where is my daughter?

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"Rouse thee, Sir Constable—
Rouse thee and look;
Fisherman, bring your net,—
Boatman, your hook:
Beat in the lily beds,
Dive in the brook.

"Vainly the constable
Shouted and called her;
Vainly the fisherman
Beat the green alder;
Vainly he flung the net,
Never it hauled her!

"Mother beside the fire
Sat, her night-cap in;
Father, in easy chair,
Gloomily napping;
When at the window-sill
Came a light tapping.

"And a pale countenance
Looked through the casement.
Loud beat the mother's heart,
Sick with amazement;
And at the vision, which
Came to surprise her,
Shrieked in an agony—
'Lor', it's Elizar!'

"Yes, 'twas Elizabeth—
Yes, 'twas their girl;
Pale was her cheek, and her
Hair out of curl.
'Mother!' the loving one,
Blushing, exclaimed,
'Let not your innocent
Lizzy be blamed.'

"'Yesterday, going to Aunt
Jones's to tea,
Mother, dear mother, I
Forgot the latch-key!
And, as the night was cold,
And the way steep,
Mrs. Jones kept me to
Breakfast and sleep.'

"Whether her Pa and Ma
Fully believed her,
That we shall never know:
Stern they received her;
And for the work of that
Cruel, though short, night,
Sent her to bed without
Tea for a fortnight.

MORAL.

"Hey diddle diddlety,
Cat and the Fiddlety,
Maidens of England take caution by *she*
Let love and suicide
Never tempt you aside,
And always remember to take the door-key."

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The following charming little poem is, I think, very little known :

"FAIRY DAYS."

"Beside the old hall fire, upon my nurse's knee,
Of happy fairy days what tales were told to me !
I thought the world was, once, all peopled with princesses,
And my heart would beat to hear their loves and their distresses.
And many a quiet night, in slumber sweet and deep,
The pretty fairy people would visit me in sleep.

"I saw them in my dreams, come flying east and west,
With wondrous fairy gifts the new-born babe they blest :
One had brought a jewel, and one a crown of gold ;
And one has brought a curse,—but wrinkled, she, and old.
The gentle queen turns pale to hear those words of sin ;
But the king he only laughs, and bids the dance begin.

"The babe has grown to be the fairest in the land,
And rides the forest green, a hawk upon her hand,
On ambling palfrey white ; a golden robe and crown—
I've seen her in my dreams, riding up and down ;
And heard the ogre laugh—as she fell into his snare—
At the little tender creature who wept and tore her hair !

"But ever when it seemed her need was at the sorest
A prince in shining mail comes prancing through the forest :
A waving ostrich plume, a buckler burnished bright ;
I've seen him in my dreams—good sooth ! a gallant knight.
His lips are coral red beneath a dark moustache :
See how he waves his hand and how his blue eyes flash !

"'Come forth, thou Paynim knight !' he shouts in accents clear.
The giant and the maid both shake his voice to hear.
Saint Mary guard him well ! he draws his falchion keen—
The giant and the knight are fighting on the green.
I see them in my dreams, the knight gives stroke on stroke,
The giant pants and reels, and tumbles like an oak !

"With what a blushing grace he falls upon his knee
And takes the lady's hand and whispers 'You are free !'
Ah ! happy childish tales of knight and faërie !
I waken from my dreams, but there's ne'er a knight for me ;
I waken from my dreams and wish that I could be
A child by the old hall fire, upon my nurse's knee."

What tender, delicate, smiling grace there is about these lines. Tears were mingled with the ink when Thackeray wrote them.

Now I will quote a few lines of Thackeray's sketch of Charlotte Brontë, prefacing her last fragment of a story—"Emma:"

"I saw her first just as I rose out of an illness from which I had never thought to recover. I remember the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes. She gave me the impression of being a very pure, and lofty, and high-minded person. A great and holy reverence of right and truth seemed to be with her always—such, in our brief interview, she appeared to me. As one thinks of that life, so noble, so lonely, of that passion for truth, of those nights and nights of eager study, swarming fancies, invention, depression, elation, prayer; as one reads the necessarily incomplete though most touching and admirable history of the heart that throbbed in this one little frame—of this one amongst the myriad of souls that have lived and died on this great earth—this great earth?—this little speck in the infinite universe of God—with what wonder do we think of to-day, with what awe wait for to-morrow, when that which is now but darkly seen shall be clear! As I read this little fragmentary sketch I think of the rest. Is it? And where is it? Will not the leaf be turned some day, and the story be told? Shall the deviser of the tale somewhere perfect the

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history of little Emma's griefs and troubles. Shall Titania come forth complete with her sportive court, and with the flowers at her feet, the forest around her, and all the stars of summer glittering overhead? How well I remember the delight and wonder, and pleasure with which I read 'Jane Eyre,' sent to me by an author whose name and sex were then alike unknown to me; the strange fascination of the book, and how, with all my own work pressing upon me, I could not—having taken the volumes up—lay them down until they were read through. Hundreds of those who, like myself, recognized and admired that master-work of a great genius, will look with a mournful interest and regard and curiosity upon this, the last fragmentary sketch from the noble hand which wrote 'Jane Eyre.'"

Did you ever read a more generous tribute of praise paid by one genius to another? And Thackeray did not wait till the poor author was dead to pay it. Thackeray told Mr. Smith of the firm of Smith and Elder, that "Jane Eyre" was a work of the greatest genius and originality, which only confirmed Mr. Smith's opinion. A noble cheque was sent, which quite astonished the modest little author, who was living in a little vicarage on a bleak hill-side in Yorkshire. Thackeray took every opportunity of enthusiastically praising the work wherever he went; and, I need not say that such praise went a very long way. And this man, whom I want you to love as well as admire, heartless and brainless noodles call a cynic!

Now a few words of self-criticism:

"Alexandre Dumas describes himself, when inventing the plan of a work, as lying silent on his back for two whole days on the deck of a yacht in a Mediterranean port. At the end of two days he arose and called for dinner. In those two days he had built his plot. He had moulded a mighty clay, to be cast presently in perennial brass. The chapters, the incidents, the characters, the combinations, were arranged in the artist's brain ere he set pen to paper. My Pegasus won't fly, so as to let me survey the field below me. He has no wings, he is blind of one eye certainly, he is restive, stubborn, slow; crops a hedge when he ought to be galloping, or gallops when he ought to be quiet. He never will show off when I want him. Sometimes he goes at a pace which surprises me. Sometimes, when I most wish him to make the running, the brute turns restive, and I am obliged to let him take his own time. I wonder do other novel writers experience this fatalism? They *must* go a certain way, in spite of themselves. I have been surprised by the observations made by some of my characters. It seems as if an occult power was moving the pen. The personage does or says something, and I ask, how the dickens did he come to think of that? Every man has remarked in dreams the vast dramatic power which is sometimes evinced; I won't say the surprising power, for nothing does surprise you in dreams. But those strange characters you meet make instant observations of which you never can have thought previously. In like manner, the imagination foretells things. We spake anon of the *inflated* style of some writers. What also if there is an *afflated* style,—when a writer is like a Pythoness on her oracle tripod, and mighty words, words which he cannot help, come blowing, and bellowing, and whistling, and

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moaning through the speaking pipes of his bodily organ? I have told you it was a very queer shock to me the other day when, with a letter of introduction in his hand, the artist's (not my) Philip Fermin walked into this room, and sat down in the chair opposite. In the novel 'Pendennis,' written ten years ago, there is an account of a certain Costigan, whom I had invented (as I suppose authors invent their personages, out of scraps, heel-taps, odds and ends of characters). I was smoking in a tavern parlour one night—and this Costigan came into the room alive—the very man—the most remarkable resemblance of the printed sketches of the man, of the rude drawings in which I had depicted him. He had the same little coat, the same battered hat, cocked on one eye, the same twinkle in that eye. 'Sir,' said I, knowing him to be an old friend whom I had met in unknown regions—'Sir,' I said, 'may I offer you a glass of brandy and water?' 'Bedad you may,' says he, 'and I'll sing ye a song tu.' Of course he spoke with an Irish brogue. Of course he had been in the army. In ten minutes he pulled out an army agent's account whereon his name was written. A few months ago we read of him in a police court. How had I come to know him, to divine him? Nothing shall convince me that I have not seen that man in the *world of spirits. In the world of spirits and water I know I did:* but that is a mere quibble of words. I was not surprised when he spoke in an Irish brogue. I had had cognizance of him before, somehow. Who has not felt that little shock which arises when a person, a place, some words in a book (there is always a collocation) present themselves to you, and you know that you have before met the same person, words, scene and so forth?

"They used to call the good Sir Walter the 'Wizard of the North.' What if some writer should appear who can write so *enchantingly* that he shall be able to call into actual life the people whom he invents? What if Mignon, and Margaret, and Goetz von Berlichingen are alive now (though I don't say they are visible), and Dugald Dalgetty and Ivanhoe were to step in at that open window by the little garden yonder?

"Suppose Uncas and our noble old Leather Stocking were to glide silent in? Suppose Athos, Porthos, and Aramis should enter with a noiseless swagger, curling their moustachios? And dearest Amelia Booth, on Uncle Toby's arm; and Tittlebat Titmous, with his hair dyed green; and all the Crummles company of comedians, with the Gil Blas troupe; and Sir Roger de Coverley; and the greatest of all crazy gentlemen, the Knight of La Mancha, with his blessed squire? I say to you, I look rather wistfully towards the window, musing upon these people. Were any of them to enter, I think I should not be very much frightened. Dear old friends, what pleasant hours I have had with them! We do not meet each other very often, but when we do, we are ever happy to meet. I had a capital half-hour with Jacob Faithful last night, when the

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last sheet was corrected, when 'Finis' had been written, and the printer's boy, with the copy, was safe in Green Arbour Court.

"So you are gone, little printer's boy, with the last scratches and corrections on the proof, and a fine flourish by way of Finis at the story's end. *The last correction?* I say these last corrections seem never to be finished. A plague upon the weeds. Every day, when I walk in my own little literary garden plot, I spy some, and should like to have a spud and root them out. Those idle words, neighbour, are past remedy. That turning back to the old pages produces anything but elation of mind. Would you not pay a pretty fine to be able to cancel some of them? Oh! the sad old pages, the dull old pages! Oh, the cares, the *ennui*, the squabbles, the repetitions, the old conversations over and over again! But now and again a kind thought is recalled, and now and again a dear memory. Yet a few chapters more, and then the last: *After which, behold Finis itself come to an end, and the infinite begun.*"

The curtain which separates this world from the next had grown very thin to Thackeray when he wrote those words.

The last quotation I shall trouble you with is a short poem which paints very beautifully the pathetic close of the noble and self-sacrificing life of Thackeray's most exquisite creation, Colonel Newcome.

> "His golden locks Time hath to silver turned;
> O Time so swift, O swiftness never ceasing!
> His youth 'gainst time and age hath ever spurned,
> But spurned in vain; youth waneth by increasing.
> Beauty, strength, youth are flowers but fading seen.
> Duty, faith, love are roots, and ever green.
> His helmet now shall make a hive for bees,
> And lovers' songs be turned to holy psalms;
> A man at arms must now serve on his knees,
> And feed on prayers, which are old age's alms."

After what you have just read, I hope, not for the first time, there can be no difference of opinion as to the nobility, beauty, and tenderness of Thackeray's genius.

No one can feel more vividly than I do the light and sketchy character of what I have written on Thackeray. I have not touched on the "Four Georges," one of the ripest, richest, and boldest pieces of historical, satirical writing I am acquainted with. His delightfully tender and humorous poems I have only glanced at.

What I have tried to do, in a short article, was to endeavour to point out the salient characteristics of our author's character and genius, and to attempt to destroy the vulgar and utterly erroneous opinion many people have of his cynicism. If I have proved to every one capable of feeling the effect of true and simple pathos that Thackeray possessed the power to touch the heart and conscience, and if what I have written will induce those who have read Thackeray as people ought to read Braddon and Ouida, that is, very skippingly, to read him with the care he deserves, the object I have had in writing this sketch will have been attained.

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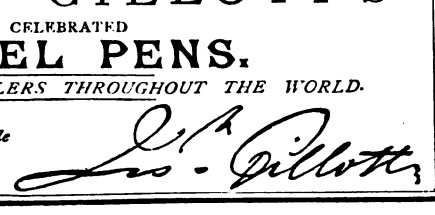

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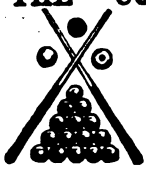

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